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ABSTRACT

The Early English Composition Reassessment Project grew out of recommendations from a 1981 task force appointed by the Ohio Board of Regents that had been asked to develop a college preparatory curriculum defining collegiate expectations for entering students and reducing the need for remedial courses at the college level. The inservice training program that evolved focused on the assessment of high school juniors' writing skills, but incorporated into assessment development, administration, scoring, and feedback was continual inservice training for all teachers involved for a year. The workshop planners included three administrator/teachers from a technical college, three university teachers, and two teachers from each of the three high schools (from which the superintendents had each contributed $10,000 for the project). The workshops were a week-long summer workshop and a combination of all day Saturday and evening workshops funded by the grant and whole week-day workshops, funded by the high schools. As a result, the participants gained a clearer sense of the skills wanted in the student writing samples. Other changes noted were the change from being product oriented to being process oriented; the change in teachers' ideas that all papers must be read, marked, revised, read again, and graded; and the change in teachers' attitudes toward their students and toward their role as a teacher. The result of a collaborative inservice program such as this is that it will help provide high schools with better information about the writing performance of students, with the by-product of improved relationships between universities and high schools. (EL)

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Making Connections Between Colleges and High Schools Through In-service Teacher Training

My presentation is a "Once-upon-a-time" account of my participation in a collaboration between high school and college composition teachers. While it would be premature to say that "Everyone lived happily ever after," I can say that the relationship is surviving--despite political, practical, and pedagogical problems.

In late October 1983 the president of Ohio University received from the Ohio Board of Regents a request for proposals for grants to develop Early English Composition Assessment Projects. The president sent the request to the provost upstairs. The provost sent the letter to the associate provost across the hall. The associate provost sent the request to the English Department chair across campus, who carried it across the hall to the director of freshman composition, downstairs to the former chair, and down the corridor to the former director of freshman composition and to me, the university coordinator of composition. By the time the request got to me, only ten days were left before OU's six-week winter break and the scattering of us all. Seven days were left by the time we were all free to meet to decide if we wanted to submit a proposal to coordinate a $90,000 project establishing connections between Ohio colleges and high schools, connections that were hoped would lead to a decrease in the number of developmental writing classes in Ohio's colleges.

Of those of us who met, one in the group announced that he didn't want to participate because a project that called for collaboration of university and high school teachers was doomed from the start. Besides, he said, it

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would just be too much work. Another argued that his experience with high schools had taught him that high school teachers and administrators wouldn't collaborate, that at best the high school administrators would sign the proposal but the university would have to do all of the work. A third said that, while he would cooperate in developing the proposal, that was all he'd do. What if it were funded? Who would direct the project? Furthermore, he told me, I shouldn't get involved either. I should be putting my energy where it belonged--into scholarship and publications that are essential for tenure. Tenure committees, he said, say nice things about service to the department, but they don't give much weight to it when they make their tenure decisions.

I argued that we had the resources to make a collaborative project work. I also argued that we had many high school contacts we could call upon. Moreover--I practically shouted--the university had hired me specifically to coordinate a writing program and to raise the community and campus consciousness about writing skills. A collaborative project would put the university's mouth where its money was.

My arguments failed. I left that Friday meeting knowing that we would not submit a proposal to the Board of Regents.

The next day, however, was Saturday, and Ohio University had a home football game. The chair of the English Department attended the game with the dean to whom I report as coordinator. Mysteriously, on Monday, I was told that we were going to submit a proposal. I would put together a proposal with the recalcitrant member who had said such a project would be too much work.

Unfortunately, at that point I left the country for five weeks, leaving my colleague to line up the high schools for us to collaborate with. When I returned, I learned that he had found us three high schools. In addition, however, we had taken on a college partner. The nearby technical college,

housed in one building, had had fewer corridors through which to pass the Board's request, so it had cornered the market on neighboring high schools with which to collaborate. If we wanted to work with those three schools, we'd have to work with the technical college.

Now that we were ankle-deep in the project, we investigated the origins of the request for proposals. We learned that the Board of Regents' request had grown out of recommendations from a 1981 task force appointed by the Board, The Advisory Commission on Articulation Between Secondary Education and Ohio Colleges. This commission had been asked to develop "a college preparatory curriculum that clearly defined collegiate expectations for entering students, [one that,] when followed, may reduce the need for remedial course-work at the college level."[1]

Since teachers are essential to prescribing college preparatory curriculum, the commission had raised the issue of teacher preparation. How is a teacher to be kept current in fulfilling the responsibility of developing curricula? It recommended that teachers participate in in-service training at the same time they are actively involved in classroom activities.

The Early English Composition Assessment Project, however, had as its ostensible goal the assessment of the writing skills of college-bound juniors and the development of an English curriculum that would adequately prepare college-bound students for future education activities. The request for proposals made teacher training appear only incidental to the project.

In our planning for the year-long collaborative project, we knew immediately that two of the requisites for the grant made us uncomfortable: First, the grant called for an assessment of the writing skills of college-bound juniors. Many of the graduates of the schools with which we were collaborating did not go on to college. Of the 1984 classes, for example, 51%, 62%, and 35%

of the students went to college. Therefore, we felt morally bound to test all of the students. Furthermore, to test only declared college-bound students was not only elitist, but also pointless. Many of the graduates from our rural schools did not decide to attend college until the end of their senior year or later. So we couldn't really identify "college-bound" students.

Second, we felt that all disciplines should be taking an active role in teaching writing and reinforcing writing skills. Therefore, our proposal called for the assessment of all juniors and across-the-curriculum accommodations for practice in writing. However, because the request for proposals had made in-service training seem incidental, our proposal gave short shrift to workshops for high school teachers, gratuitously including a week-long workshop during the summer before the assessment began and another one when the assessment was finished.

The Board rejected our proposal because we had neglected to describe an intensive on-going in-service training program. They did, however, applaud our testing all juniors and our emphasis on writing across the disciplines. They said we were on to something and gave us a planning grant to re-think our project.

The rejection of our proposal was a blessing. In the short time it took us to decide to resubmit it, we realized how much we would benefit from having high school teachers in on the planning. In retrospect, we college participants are amazed that we hadn't thought of including them from the start, since we now know that the project's success is due to our acknowledgment that we are all professional educators who have common problems.

So the original project planners (three administrators/teachers from the technical college, three from the university) were joined by two teachers from each of the three high schools. They were quick to point out that they

did not want the traditional in-service program, the kind in which a college professor holds forth while the returning teacher passively waits to receive the word.

Our new proposal, then, was sharply focussed on the assessment of high school juniors' writing skills but incorporated into the assessment development, administration, scoring, and feedback was continual in-service training--for all of us, not just for the high school teachers.

In the time that remains, I would like to describe how in-service training can be a truly collaborative effort. In our case, it has focussed on achieving the long-range goal the Board of Regents charged us with--to reduce the need for remedial coursework at the college-level--through the short-range goal of assessing the students' writing abilities. As with all projects like ours, our work has been shaped and reshaped by political, practical, and pedagogical constraints, some of which I have aready suggested.

I have, for example, identified one aspect of in-service training that is politically problematic: college teachers who plan and conduct in-service workshops too frequently fail to seek advice from high school teachers. We are slow to reverse the traditional pecking order, as a recent national study conducted by the Department of Education has found.[2] While education reforms are indeed taking place, it reports, most are centrally imposed. Of the twenty educational improvement categories identified in the study, most focussed on creating more courses, giving more tests, improving teacher preparation. Only two supported some sort of rejuvenation of teachers, some sort of renewal of spirit. Clearly, the authors of <u>The Nation Responds</u> conclude, we are still trying to fix the system from the top.

In the case of our joint effort, the four members of the summer workshop planning group (a technical college teacher, a university teacher, a

high school teacher, and a graduate student) liked working with each other, liked sharing ideas. As a result, we met regularly for dinner, frequently identifying in those informal sessions potential problems that we were then able to forestall.

Let me quickly identify two other political decisions our initial planners had to make. While they weren't of the magnitude of the one I just mentioned, they did cause us some consternation. First, who should be on the planning committee for the project? Because all the superintendents of the three schools had committed their schools to $10,000 contributions, we felt that they should select the participants. We were lucky in the selections of the six teachers. They have been willing to juggle class time to try new ideas, willing to juggle their time with their families to meet in the evenings and on Saturdays. And they have been enthusiastic about their project.

We were also lucky when the planning group teachers selected the teachers from their schools who they thought should attend the summer workshop. One selected a teacher whose primary teaching assignment was reading, her secondary one, English. Because we were concentrating on writing skills, not reading skills, I asked the planning group member who had selected the reading/English teacher if the workshop would be beneficial to her choice. The inviter replied, "You told me to use my judgment." I wisely backed off--fortunately, I might add, since the part-time English teachers was one of the most active participants in the summer workshop and in succeeding sessions.

A second potentially politically hot issue was how to report the scores on the writing samples. There is, as you can imagine, a natural rivalry among the three neighboring school systems. The rivalry is complicated by the fact that the principal of one participating school has become the superintendent

of another, and the assistant principal of one has been named the principal of another. And it is further complicated by the fact that in one of the three schools, no essays were rated High. Obviously, no goodwill could come from publicized comparisons of scores among the schools. The solution to that problem was to provide each school with its scores and ask the teachers to decide how to report the scores.

Let me move to some practical constraints that have been imposed on our regularly scheduled workshops. The high schools are, as I mentioned earlier, committed to contributions of $10,000 each. One way they can contribute is to hire substitutes for the school days on which we meet. (The grant pays for non-school days, but naturally there are only so many Saturdays that any of us are willing to give up.) Unfortunately, when the entire group meets, eighteen qualified substitutes are needed. The absence of a metropolitan area in Southeastern Ohio has made it difficult to find eighteen qualified substitutes.

One solution to the substitute shortage, we determined, was to have half-day meetings. In that case, no substitutes were hired. Instead, teachers were asked to cover the workshop participants' classes during their free periods. The participants began to sense some hostility from their colleagues, so we abandoned that plan in favor of evening workshops paid for by the grant. That arrangement worked for a while, but several teachers and administrators objected to losing evenings with their families. Others objected to not having time to recover from teaching over 150 students a day. A compromise has worked: a combination of all-day Saturday and evening workshops, funded by the grant, and whole week-day workshops, funded by the high schools. In addition, the planning group members have a chance to send substitutes from the summer in-service workshop group to help develop the scoring guides.

Other practical constraints have arisen from both nature and human nature. Just as we could not anticipate that three Saturday workshops would be cancelled because of snow, we could not anticipate that one of our assessment topics would be compromised. Because a writing topic must try to elicit the best work from the students, we spent several days designing the topics and reworking them after they had been field-tested. I arranged an afternoon workshop at each school, and each school's participants developed two topics. (A digression: Because it was the first time all of us had gotten together since the week-long workshop, we invited the principals to come to the beginning of each session to hear the participants discuss how they were incorporating into their classes some of the things we'd done in the summer session. It was important for the principals to see the bonding that had developed among the workshop participants, and it was important for them to hear how their classroom would be changing as a result of their schools' participation in the project.)

At the first of the three schools, one of the topics we developed assumed the theft of an English exam. When we went to the second school, we found that we could not use that topic, since an English exam had recently been pilfered there.

Despite our frustration at the amount of hammering out, arguing, and rewriting we had to do to come up with six topics, we learned a great deal about our common assumptions about students, writing, testing, expectations, etc. We also came away with a clear sense of what skills we wanted the students to demonstrate in their writing samples. And the participants agreed that, as a result of their having designed test topics, their future writing assignments would be better, would elicit from the students whatever it was they had hoped to elicit. Like much of what we have done, then, the development of test topics has had pedagogical implications.

Another constraint has been time. Or perhaps a better way of putting it is to say that our planning is constrained by our not knowing how long any task will take. For example, after we had created the scoring guides for holistically rating the juniors' essays, we began to describe, in terms of High, Middle, Low, the traits we were looking for in the essays. We had allotted two days for each of the topics. Writing the descriptions required six meetings.

At first I was overtly frustrated by the fact that each task on the agenda seemed to take two or three times longer than we planners had expected it to. Participants would sometimes stop proceedings and ask--sometimes jokingly, sometimes seriously--if I had a suggestion for speeding things up. But now I see that, for example, as we refine our scoring guides for our assessment, we are also identifying assumptions that underlie our written responses to our students' papers.

The pedagogical constraints on in-service training, no matter whether it is planned collaboratively or imposed from the top, are many. First, it won't come as a surprise to you that the major impediment to convincing teachers to shift from a product orientation to a process orientation came from their comfort in teaching grammar and punctuation and from the fact that their students will take standarized tests that require them to know grammar and punctuation rules.

A second pedagogical constraint is the firmly-held belief that all papers that the students write must be read, marked, revised, read again, and graded. So much of what we tried to accomplish in the summer workshop and the day-long sessions revolves around helping the teachers see that they must give up that notion. I am frequently discouraged, as I was when in the library, I ran into one of our most pleasant and enthusiastic converts to process. I asked

her what she was up to, and she pointed to her open grade book: she was grading a stack of journals, sets of drafts, paper-clipped sets of outlines, and sets of revisions. She was grading everything the students had written. And she was annoyed that teaching by process was not really as time-saving as she had been led to believe.

Finally, no in-service training program--even one collaboratively conceived and conducted--can do much about changing the attitudes some teachers have toward their students and toward their role as a teacher. For example, it is hard to convince a teacher who calls her students "boneheads" that peer evaluation is useful. And it is hard to convince a teacher who believes that truly good students need no guidance in writing, just a lot of writing practice that this single marginal note on a senior's paper about the complex subject of homosexuality in Moby Dick will not help her improve her writing skills: The teacher's sole comment was "Is this subject appropriate for your classmates?"

We have, however, seen some changes in attitudes. When college teachers publicly place the blame for the poor writing skills of our freshmen on the practices of high school English teachers, we can say "Not true. We know some dedicated teachers who are helping over 150 students a day improve their writing skills."

It's clear, I hope, that, in spite of the political, practical, and pedagogical constraints I've mentioned, I am enthusiastic about collaborative in-service programs. While it is too early to provide evidence to justify my enthusiasm, I think that juniors' writing skills will be improved as the result of in-service workshops. In addition, given the increasing concern of colleges about the qualifications of entering freshmen--9 out of 10 of the 1200 colleges polled in a recent CUNY study reported that they offer basic

writing classes[3]-- it is important for high school to have better information about the performance of their students. A continuing collaborative in-service program will provide them with that information. Finally, I think that the by-product of colleges connecting with high schools through in-service training is improved relationships between universities and high schools.

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[1] Ohio Board of Regents, Report: Advisory Commission on Articulation Between Secondary Education and Ohio Colleges (Columbus, Ohio: State Board of Education, 1981), p. 1.

[2] Reported in Ernest L. Boyer's "School Reform: Regulation or Renewal?" Education Week (November 28, 1984), p. 19.

[3] Instructional Resource Center, Assessment and Improvement of the Academic Skills of Entering Freshmen: A National Survey. Research Monograph Series Report No. 5 (New York: Office of Academic Affairs, The City of New York, 1983).